

STREAMLINING THE GLOBAL PATH TO GENDER EQUALITY: THE ROLE OF FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

Photo: UN Women/Meriza Emilbekova

Introduction

As of June 2023, application of a feminist lens to their foreign policies is committed by **Sweden** (2014*), **Canada** (2017), **France** (2019), **Mexico** (2020), **Spain** (2021), **Luxembourg** (2021), **Germany** (2021), **the Netherlands** (2022), **Scotland** (2022), **Colombia** (2022), **Slovenia** (2023), and **Chile**. Libya is considered the first African country to announce the feminist foreign policy (FFP). These were preceded by ratification of the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the four UN conferences on women.

Women, Peace and Security (WPS)

Many FFPs share common goals regarding commitments related to the Women, Peace, and Security agenda. **Colombia** places the most emphasis on WPS and recognizes the need to 1) involve women and feminist movements in post-war peace processes and 2) address conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). However, for an FFP to effectively incorporate a gendered lens into peace and security, it must comprehensively address all four pillars of the WPS agenda, namely prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery. Countries implementing or developing the

In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and in 2010, UN Women was formed. In the following years, the UN has adopted a total of [10 resolutions on WPS](#).

This brief examines the various FFPs and identifies shared aspects and gaps across seven key themes: WPS; political participation; economic empowerment; diplomacy; official development assistance (ODA); human rights in humanitarian context; and violence against women and girls (VAWG).

FFP are also implementing their with National Action Plans on WPS. These are **Sweden, Canada, France, Mexico, Spain, Luxembourg, Germany, Chile, the Netherlands, Colombia, and Slovenia**.

In the case of **Colombia**, the peace negotiations with the **Colombian** Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) have been widely praised for their strong gender perspective. Women's and feminist movements played a vital role in achieving formal peace. The **Colombian** government, focusing on

* Due to a shift in government policy in late 2022, **Sweden** no longer identifies its foreign policy (FFP) as feminist, but maintains that the government remains committed to promote gender equality in foreign policy.

intersectional inequalities, fully acknowledged the importance of resolving gender asymmetries and inequities and addressed the rights of victims at the end of the armed conflict.

Among other countries implementing or developing FFPs, **the Netherlands** has prioritized the issue of sexual violence in conflicts and placed it at the centre of discussions during the “[Ukraine Accountability Conference](#)” held in the Hague in July 2022. **Spain** actively participates in the EU Task Force on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and works to integrate gender equality into European instruments. **Spain** also supports training courses on gender in peace operations and collaborates with other countries to strengthen women’s roles in peace processes. **Sweden** and **Canada** both aim to increase women’s participation

in prevention efforts and recognize the importance of incorporating women’s perspectives and experiences in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In 2022, **Canada** was the eighth-largest donor in assessed contributions to the UN’s peacekeeping budget and one of the largest donors in voluntary funding to help improve and reform UN peace operations¹. This includes the deployment of gender justice and PSEA (protection from sexual exploitation and abuse) experts and training on gender equality delivered to military, police and civilian personnel. Lastly, **Scotland’s** feminist approach to foreign policy has contributed to the international WPS agenda since 2016 through the “[Women in Conflict 1325 Fellowship](#)” which, since 2016, has built up a network of almost 300 women from 27 countries across the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and Latin America.

RECOGNIZED GLOBAL PLATFORMS ON WPS INCLUDE:

1. [WPS Focal Points Network](#) was launched in 2016 to assist UN Member States and regional organisations, in close collaboration with civil society, to improve and strengthen the implementation of the WPS agenda at the origin of decision-making processes. The Network recognized “the need to establish synergy with plans and strategies that address emergency and humanitarian response, refugees and internally displaced persons, climate change, youth, peace and security, countering all forms of extremism and radicalization, issues of trafficking, the gendered impacts of small arms and light weapons, and gender-responsive early-warning systems.” 11 out of 95 members (11.6%) are implementing or developing FFPs, namely **Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden**.
2. [The Compact on WPS and Humanitarian Action](#) was launched in July 2021 in the framework of the Generation Equality Forum. It now has nearly 200 signatories, including 19 UN Member States. Its objective is to drive accountability and action on gender equality to address conflicts and humanitarian crises through strong partnerships, improved monitoring and assessment of progress and a focus on financing and advocacy. 7 out of 19 (36.8%) Member States signatories of the Compact are implementing or developing FFPs, namely **Canada, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, and Sweden**.
3. [Group of Friends on WPS](#) is an informal network of 65 Member States, representing all five regional groups of the UN, and the European Union. It was organised by **Canada** to jointly advocate for the implementation of WPS resolutions, discuss and coordinate positions on issues pertaining to WPS and to keep pressure on the UN system to implement WPS Resolutions. 12 out of 65 members (18.5%) are implementing or developing FFPs, namely **Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden**.

¹ <https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/departamental-results-reports-rapport-resultats-ministeriels/2021-2022.aspx?lang=eng>

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Numerous countries implementing or developing FFPs acknowledge that women's equal political participation and representation is a prerequisite for addressing gender equality concerns in policies and legislation, including those pertaining to foreign affairs.

In this regard, **Sweden**'s feminist approach to foreign policy aims to support women's political participation and representation across various levels, encouraging their leadership roles in politics and decision-making processes – "The Swedish Foreign Service shall promote women's participation and influence in decision-making processes at all levels and in all areas, and shall seek dialogue with women representatives at all levels, including in civil society."² **Sweden** has a long history of supporting women's representation in politics and has achieved near parity in the proportion of women in parliament and in the Cabinet of Ministers of women in parliament and government positions.

One of the main goals of **Colombia**'s FFP is to promote gender equality and the political participation of women "in all their diversity". Indeed, the 2022 elections in **Colombia** brought about significant increases in women's representation in politics. **Canada** prioritizes enhancing the rights and empowerment of women and girls, including their leadership and involvement in decision-making processes. It also co-leads of the [Generation Equality Action Coalition on Feminist Movements and Leadership](#). **Mexico**'s FFP aims to reduce and eliminate gender gaps and inequalities, creating a more just and prosperous society. One of its FFP

goals is achieving parity within the Foreign Ministry, ensuring equal representation and participation of women in decision-making positions, and promoting gender balance throughout the ministry's operations.

In **Chile**, incorporating women in decision-making processes at all levels of elected and appointed government as well as strengthening visibility and transparency in favour of gender, together with introducing regulatory and normative changes to adapt the working language in the Foreign Ministry and transform it into an inclusive and nondiscriminatory one, will be central to the upcoming FFP.

Spain advocates for the full and effective participation of women and girls in political and public, and decision-making. **Spain** supports women's engagement in local-level politics and leadership, seeks to increase women's presence in human rights multilateral bodies, and promotes their involvement in peace processes and mediation initiatives.

Luxembourg also strives to enhance the representation and participation of women across all sectors of society and actively promoted gender equality within its diplomatic structures. Moreover, the country emphasizes increasing women's involvement of foreign policy, including diplomacy, cooperation, defense, and civilian missions.

The Netherlands devotes considerable attention to ensuring women's meaningful participation in decision-making. **The Netherlands** examines the impact of its foreign policy on women including via grant awards, diplomacy, and during international negotiations.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Overall, a fair number of the analysed FFPs acknowledge and seek to address the structural barriers and discrimination that women face in accessing economic resources, opportunities, and decision-making power. By recognizing how women's empowerment benefits societies as a whole, the FFPs aim to level the playing field and create more equitable

societies, in some cases linking women's economic empowerment with the fight against SGBV. Compared to other key themes, however, women's economic empowerment seems to appear as secondary to the various FFPs, and not as widely mentioned as the other areas of concern.

2 <https://fojo.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/handbook-swedens-feminist-foreign-policy.pdf>

Sweden, Germany, Mexico, and Spain co-lead the [Generation Equality Forum Action Coalition on Economic Justice and Rights](#), spearheading efforts to empower women economically. Their initiatives encompass various aspects such as promoting decent work, addressing the care economy, facilitating resource access, enhancing financing options, and embracing digitalization. **Spain** also actively engages in international fora, making commitments to advance women's economic rights.

Looking at **Sweden's** FFP, it places a strong emphasis on promoting equal opportunities for women in employment and entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on achieving economic empowerment. **Sweden** has contributed to central recommendations from economic forums, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, emphasising the importance of including growth and women's participation in the labour market. The country has also aimed to enhance a gender equality perspective in trade policy through international organisations, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and as part of EU trade negotiations. It has promoted gender equality in corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts, including through intensified bilateral work with the aim of strengthening women's roles and rights within the labour market in countries such as Iran, Cambodia, Croatia, Nigeria, Poland and Türkiye. It has also supported the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Middle East and North Africa programme, which has focused on enterprise with gender equality awareness and has contributed to the establishment of a Women's Economic Empowerment Forum.

Canada also prioritises women's economic empowerment as a means to combat discrimination, gender-based violence, and to overall enhance the rights and empowerment of women and girls. **Canada** focuses its international assistance on increasing economic leadership and empowerment of women at all levels, including promoting the

importance of women's economic participation at high-level forums and other international gatherings. **Canada** also aims to improve economic opportunities for and the resilience of rural women, including through greater adoption of climate-smart methods of food production and supporting local woman-led agricultural businesses. It promotes greater financial inclusion for women and encourages lending to women entrepreneurs through **Canada's** Development Finance Institute. It also supports women's economic rights and access to decent work. This includes promoting labour, land, inheritance and property rights for women by supporting the reform of restrictive laws and regulations. Additionally, **Canada** supports technical and vocational training for women and aims to help address unpaid work and the disproportionate burden of care shouldered by women.

Similarly, **Scotland's** FFP revolves around three key areas of focus, with economic justice being one of them. **Scotland** ensures that its international endeavours align with its commitment to fairness and inclusion domestically, emphasising a feminist approach to policymaking. **Scotland** recognised the importance of gender in their [Vision for Trade](#) and in their first [Annual Report](#) considering the differential impacts of trade on society. The Vision for Trade identified some of the actions the Scottish Government can take to make trade more inclusive and to address the impacts of trade liberalisation on women, such as building links between their domestic policies and trade principles to support gender equality and remove barriers to participation in trade faced by women in **Scotland** and internationally.

Chile co-leads the Generation Equality [Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality](#), which focuses on leveraging technology to advance gender equality, favour women's employment and empowerment, and formulate innovative solutions responding to the needs of women and girls.

DIPLOMACY

Gender-sensitive diplomacy involves integrating a gender perspective into foreign policy decisions and engagements. This includes advocating for women's rights in bilateral and multilateral dialogues, negotiations, and agreements. Many of the FFPs count this as a key priority. In addition, many FFPs support women's increased participation in diplomacy and multilateral fora.

Canada and **Sweden** have the highest share of women-ambassadors - 50% - across 40 countries and the EU in 2022, while **the Netherlands** has 37% and **Colombia** 26.7%³.

For example, **Sweden's** pioneering policy highlighted multilateral engagement as a priority, aiming to collaborate with international organisations, such as the UN, to advance gender equality globally, as well as actively promoting women's rights in various forums and pushing for the integration of gender perspectives in multilateral policy discussions and decision-making processes. As a result of its FFP, **Sweden's** institutional culture has undergone a significant shift. In the UN Security Council, **Sweden** has strongly advocated for women's involvement in peacebuilding and conflict

prevention⁴. **Canada's** 2017 policy follows this theme and states its aims to collaborate with international organisations, civil society, and other countries to advance gender equality. **Canada** seeks to build partnerships and share best practices for promoting women's rights and empowerment worldwide. Feminist diplomacy is also a key aspect of **France's** foreign policy, aiming to include gender considerations in all diplomatic priorities and actions. Additionally, **Mexico's** first principle of its feminist foreign policy emphasises the need for a feminist agenda in international affairs, particularly considering the impact of policies and actions on gender equality and promoting women's rights and empowerment in diplomatic engagements. Under its FFP, **Mexico** has pledged to reach gender equality within its foreign service by 2024.

Luxembourg, one of the top 20 donors to UN Women, recruited women to constitute 60% of the total workforce within the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs already in 2020⁵. In 2022, the Netherlands' Defence secretary announced targets to increase the percentage of women in the organisation's workforce from 16% to 30% by 2030⁶.

OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE (ODA)

FFPs play a crucial role in the overall development agenda by integrating gender equality and women's empowerment into national and international decision-making processes. These policies recognise that achieving sustainable development requires addressing the structural barriers that hinder women's full participation and rights. They emphasise the importance of promoting women's economic empowerment, access to education and healthcare, and the elimination of VAWG. FFPs also aim to dismantle discriminatory norms and practices, promote equal representation of women in leadership positions, and ensure that women's voices are heard in policymaking and peacebuilding processes. As such, many countries have integrated their FFPs into their development programming and use them to guide funding priorities.

UN Secretary General's Forward-Looking Goals on WPS, outlined in his [2020 report](#): "Galvanize the donor community's support for universal compliance with the target of allocating a minimum of 15 per cent of ODA to conflict-affected countries to advancing gender equality, and the remaining 85 per cent to integrating gender considerations, including multiplying by five direct assistance to women's organisations, currently at 0.2 per cent."

Sweden pledged to allocate a significant portion of its foreign aid budget to projects and initiatives that promote gender equality and women's empowerment in partner

3 Source: Women in Diplomacy Index, 2022

4 <https://www.prio.org/projects/1893>

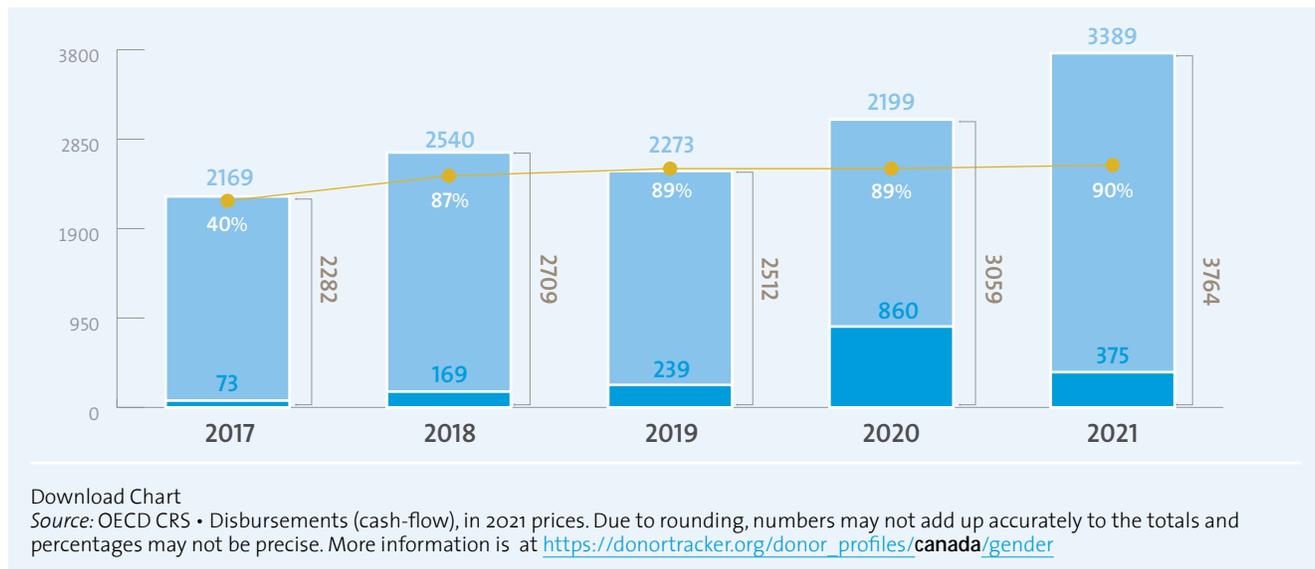
5 <https://www.gendersecurityproject.com/post/luxembourg-s-feminist-foreign-policy>

6 Source: [Adopting the feminist foreign policy](#), 2023

countries. It aimed to support organisations working on gender-related issues and strengthen the capacity of local women’s rights activists. In 2021, **Sweden**’s prioritisation of projects that incorporate some gender equality was at 73% of bilateral allocable ODA, well above the DAC average of 42%, although this figure dropped by 12% compared to 2019. Notably, **Sweden** is to date the largest donor to UN Women⁷. **France** and **Spain** have committed to increase to 85% its ODA allocation to gender policy and promoting gender equality objectives abroad, in line with the [EU Gender Action Plan](#) 2021-2025. The French Development Agency manages a grant budget of €120 million to support feminist movements and NGOs in developing countries. The government focuses on healthcare, raising the legal age

of marriage, vocational training, education, and improved infrastructure. **France** also doubled its contribution to UN Women as part of the Generation Equality Forum pledge in 2021. Approximately 99% of **Canada**’s bilateral international development assistance in 2021-2022 either targeted or integrated gender equality; supported more than 1,800 women’s rights organisations that are promoting gender equality and advancing the rights of women and girls. This past year alone, Canadian-funded programs reached more than 42 million people through projects aimed at ending sexual and GBV, including harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting. **Canada**’s funding for gender equality has increased 68% since 2017 when **Canada** implemented its FFP.⁸

FIGURE 1:
Canada’s ODA related to Gender Equality, 2017-2021



The Netherlands actively supports women’s rights, gender equality, sexual rights, and reproductive health by providing funding for various activities and programs, and it boasts one of the largest funds worldwide, the SDG 5 Fund, with a budget of €510 million (2021-2025), specifically allocated to women’s rights and gender equality. As part of **Germany**’s policy, the Federal Foreign Office aims to allocate 85% of aid

funding to projects that include gender equality as a secondary objective, with a minimum of 8% allocated to projects where gender equality is the primary objective by 2025. According to the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) data in 2021, 46% of **Luxembourg**’s ODA was gender-focused (8% with gender as a principal objective, and over 38% as a significant objective).

7 <https://open.unwomen.org/partners>

8 [Canada / Gender Equality](#)

HUMAN RIGHTS IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

FFPs play a crucial role in supporting human rights and humanitarianism by promoting gender equality and addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by women in international contexts. These policies recognise that achieving true equality and respect for human rights requires addressing gender-based discrimination and violence and prioritising the empowerment and protection of women.

Sweden's FFP demonstrated a commitment to promoting gender equality as a fundamental human right. The policy sought to promote and protect women's rights globally, including reproductive rights, access to education, healthcare, and economic empowerment.

Spain's thematic priorities include the human rights of women and girls and its policy supports strengthening women's rights in civil, political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. It also increased its attention to anti-racism and specific minorities such as indigenous groups, LGBTQI+ persons and people with a disability. **Spain** monitors UN resolutions, participates in relevant UN sessions, and engages with treaty bodies and special procedures. It also presents periodic reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and advocates for the human rights of women and girls bilaterally.

Canada has pledged to prioritise the needs and rights of women and girls in its humanitarian assistance efforts, ensuring their access to vital services during crises. Its policy pledges to strengthen sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response strategies in humanitarian settings; advocate for humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law, including by shining a

light on the ways in which humanitarian crises present unique challenges for women and girls; support the full range of women and girls' sexual and reproductive health needs during humanitarian responses; help strengthen the capacity of local and national women's groups to assist in humanitarian emergencies and help address the particular unmet needs of women.

Three of the countries which have implemented FFPs are among the top ten largest donors of humanitarian aid worldwide⁹, **Canada, Sweden, and France**.¹⁰ **France** donated over 340 million USD in humanitarian aid worldwide in 2022. **Canada** donated 796 million USD.¹¹

Sweden donated 442 million USD in 2022. Humanitarian assistance remains a growing funding area for **Sweden** and was the second-largest spending area of **Sweden's** bilateral ODA, accounting for 16% of bilateral funding. Despite the withdrawal of the 'feminist' label in its foreign policy, gender has continued to feature in **Sweden's** humanitarian aid funding allocations. In 2023, **Sweden** provided almost EUR 11 million in Ukraine and Moldova to meet the humanitarian needs of women and girls impacted by the conflict in Ukraine, channelled through UNFPA and UN Women. The funds will support sexual and reproductive health and rights and combat sexual and gender-based violence, in particular.¹²

Five of the countries with FFPs are contributors to the [Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund \(WPHF\)](#), namely **Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden**. In 2022, **Germany** continued to be WPHF's largest donor, showing a strong commitment to conflict prevention, conflict resolution and forced displacement issues.

9 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/275597/largers-donor-countries-of-aid-worldwide/>

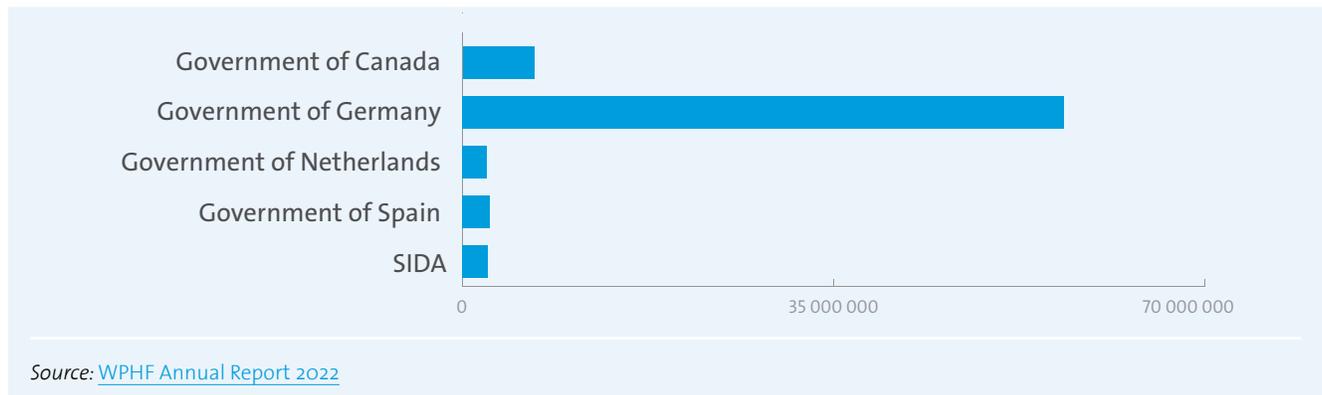
10 Largest donors of humanitarian aid worldwide in 2022 (in million U.S. dollars), by country, Statista

11 Donor Profile: **Canada**

12 **Sweden** provides almost EUR 11 million in support to women and girls in Ukraine and Moldova - [Government.se](#)

FIGURE 1:

Cumulative commitments made by the five countries with a FFP to the [Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund](#) as of 31 December 2022, in USD



VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG)

FFPs play a critical role in addressing VAWG in a global scale. These policies recognise that VAWG is a violation of human rights and a barrier to gender equality. By incorporating a feminist perspective into foreign policy, governments can actively work towards preventing and addressing VAWG in all its forms, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking.

For example, **Sweden's** policy aimed to address gender-based violence, discrimination, and harmful practices against women. It stated its actions are channelled through support for organisations within civil society and other actors working with VAWG, including through support centres, helplines and legal support for vulnerable women, as well as working with perpetrators and political influence. Its policy also stated that it is the largest donor to UN Women and UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict and carries out extensive work to highlight the link between destructive masculinity norms, violence and conflict.

Canada's policy addresses the issue of gender-based violence and aims to prevent and respond to it effectively, committing to supporting survivors, combating impunity, and strengthening legal frameworks to eliminate violence

against women and girls. **Spain** prioritises combating gender-based violence domestically and internationally. It supports the Istanbul Convention and encourages its ratification by other European countries, and **Chile's** upcoming FFP focuses on the promotion of the sexual and reproductive health rights of women and LGBTQ people, and to address VAWG.

The Netherlands was one of the initiators of the package of sanctions that the European Union (EU) announced on 8 March 2023 to impose on individuals and organisation responsible for sexual violence and large-scale violations of women's rights. Being placed on the sanctions list will result in the perpetrator's assets in the EU to be frozen and in the inability to enter the EU¹³.

Iceland and the European Union (EU) co-lead [the Generation Equality Action Coalition on GBV](#) and **France** co-leads [the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Bodily Autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights](#) (SRHR), focused on ensuring that women and girls worldwide are free to make autonomous decisions about their bodies free from coercion, violence, and discrimination.

¹³ www.government.nl/latest/news/2023/05/30/highlights-of-a-year-of-feminist-foreign-policy&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1686197692370946&usg=AOvVaw3oLPi4Xvxxsm_5AdnqIPoU

Lastly, **Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden** are current contributors to the [UN Women managed UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women](#) (UN Trust Fund), the only global, multilateral, grant-making mechanism that is dedicated exclusively to addressing all forms of VAWG.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, FFPs have emerged as a significant approach to promote gender equality and address the specific needs of women in international affairs. While there is no agreed upon definition of an FFP, these policies share common goals and commitments across various themes. In the area of WPS, FFPs emphasize the importance of involving women in post-war peace processes and addressing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence. Countries like **Colombia**, which have experienced civil wars, have recognized the critical role of women and feminist movements in achieving sustainable peace. FFPs offer a comprehensive framework for advancing gender equality and women's rights in international affairs. While there are variations in their approaches and scope, these policies demonstrate a commitment to addressing common challenges and promoting the full participation and empowerment of women in all aspects of society. The adoption of FFPs by an increasing number of countries reflects a global recognition of the importance of gender equality and the need for inclusive and transformative foreign policies.

The EU in partnership with the UN have embarked on a global, multi-year initiative focused on eliminating all forms of VAWG - [The Spotlight Initiative](#).

While external evaluations of FFPs have not yet been conducted, they have produced a significant increase in efforts towards gender equality, particularly through gender mainstreaming. **Spain** and **Sweden** have reportedly observed an internal cultural shift and a change in mindset, with a widespread integration of gender considerations across all areas of foreign policy since their FFP have been formulated. A specific challenge relates to the insufficient tools that effectively consider intersectionality, an essential aspect of feminism and a truly transformative gender approach. The current OECD-DAC gender marker, for example, fails to account for intersectionality. Similarly, one of the limitations of the FFP Index is that it does not fully reflect intersectional forms of discrimination, due to the lack of indicators capturing efforts at the global foreign policy level to protect and promote the rights of gender-diverse and non-binary people.¹⁴ Notwithstanding the progress made, ongoing commitment and efforts are crucial to ensure the sustained implementation and impact of these policies, ultimately creating a more just and equitable world for all.

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14 <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FFP-Index.pdf>